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ABSTRACT

Divorce is common phenomenon in the lives of many persons today. It changes the structure of the family and, in so doing, changes the lives of the couples involved and presents the children of divorce with their own set of adjustment issues. This study examined the literature on children's overall adjustment to divorce. Subjects (N=102) were recruited from 15 elementary, middle, and public high schools in a mid-south urban area. A stepwise multiple regression analysis was used in order to determine the relative contribution of each of the family functioning variables to children's adjustment in specific areas. The family's role in facilitating overall competence, the effect divorce can have on such development, and suggestions for mediating the negative impact of divorce on the child's adjustment level were explored. In order to determine which dimensions of family dynamics are most associated with child socio-emotional adjustment, data from the Child Behavior Checklist, the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD), and the Divorce Adjustment Inventory (DAI) were collected and analyzed. Three family subscales of the FAD (Roles, Behavior Control, and Affective Involvement) and two risk factors from the DAI (Child's Reaction and Insight into the Divorce and Conflict) were found to be significant. A systems approach to understanding divorce appears useful in assessing initial risk as well as the effectiveness of various program components. (ABL)

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Family Functions and Children's Post-Divorce Adjustment*

by

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Abstract

This study examines the literature on children's overall adjustment to divorce. The family's role in facilitating overall competence, the effect divorce can have on such development, and suggestions for mediating the negative impact of divorce on the child's adjustment level are explored. In order to determine which dimensions of family dynamics are most associated with child socio-emotional adjustment, data from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD), and the Divorce Adjustment Inventory (DAI) were collected and analyzed. Three family subscales of the FAD: Roles, Behavior Control, and Affective Involvement; and two risk factors from the DAI: Child's Reaction and Insight Into the Divorce and Conflict, were found to be significant. Implications are drawn for programs that address the needs of divorcing parents and help to mediate the effects of divorce on their children.

Introduction

Divorce is a common phenomenon in the lives of many persons today. It changes the structure of the family and, in so doing, changes the lives of the couples involved and presents the children of divorce with their own set of adjustment issues.

Most studies in the field show that children of divorce display more problems than other children in social and academic areas. There are also many other problems such as depression, anxiety, and physical ailments experienced by these children (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). Social competence is another area of interest for understanding how divorce relates to children's vulnerability. Social competence refers to areas of child adjustment such as peer and family relationships, hobbies, sports, activities, and academic performance. This definition is based on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) which provides three subscales for the social competence area: activities, social accomplishments, and school competence (Achenbach et al., 1983).

Social competence has been correlated with certain aspects of the parent-child relationship. Amato (1989) claims that general competence among elementary school children is associated with high levels of support from parents, a high degree of household responsibilities delegated to the child, and a high degree of control.

Hartup (1989) also believes that social competence is achieved through close relationships the child experiences and in turn can affect the relationships in which the child engages. He claims that two types of relationships foster this social competence: vertical

and horizontal. Vertical attachments are those with persons of unequal status, such as parents, in which the child experiences a sense of guidance and the learning of social skills. Horizontal attachments are those with persons of more equal status, such as peers. It is in these relationships that the child can experiment with the skills learned in the vertical relationships.

It seems that family relationships as well as the manner in which roles are carried out and rules enforced in the home have an impact on the ongoing development of the child's social competence, and that the development of this competence can impact the child's relationship to others.

In addition to the effect relationships can have on the development of social competence, there is also evidence that high levels of support from family members can help mediate the effects of stressful events. It appears that children who are undergoing periods of stress, but who have high levels of family support tend to experience fewer adjustment problems than those with lower levels of support (Wolchik, Ruehlman, Braver, & Sandler, 1989).

In a similar vein, Dubow and Tisak (1989) claim that higher levels of social support can mediate the level of behavioral and academic problems that children experience during periods of stress. This could be due to an increase in self-esteem as the child feels accepted and loved by the family and more capable of dealing with stressful situations.

Children of divorce have been found to cope with stress generally by internalizing or externalizing. Children often experience difficult life changes during the divorce process,

particularly with respect to the frequency and consistency of time spent with at least one parent. There is evidence to suggest gender differences in coping with stress. In particular, the literature suggests that males tend to externalize more than females (Wallerstein, 1987). Since certain conditions mediate the effects of stress, it is important to examine how divorce impacts family relationships and how this might affect the child's overall coping mechanisms.

There appears to be a relationship between higher levels of pre-divorce spousal conflict and problems in the parent-child relationship after the separation of the spouses (Portes, Haas, & Brown, 1991). Consequently, this is thought to affect emotional and behavioral adjustment adversely, possibly due to the breaking down of the parental support as a mediating factor in the child's adjustment to stress (Brown, Eichenberger, Portes, in press; Eichenberger, 1989). It also appears that the experience of conflict in a marriage has an adverse effect on parenting skills (Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1989) making it more difficult for parents to meet the needs of their children during a time when these children possibly have greater needs than ever before. Emery (1982) suggests that due to the marital conflict of the divorce experience, the parents may not be as good role models and are more likely to be inconsistent with discipline.

If a child is dependent on the parent for the learning of social skills, how that parent handles conflict with an ex-spouse might have an impact on how well the child learns to resolve and cope with her own relationship issues.

It should be noted that not all children of divorce are at risk for adjustment difficulties (Portes et al., 1991). Researchers have claimed that it is not the divorce per se, but rather the level of conflict that affects the adjustment level of these children (Brown et al., in press; Long, Forehand, Fauber, & Brody, 1987).

In a study focusing on competence in young adolescents, Long et al. (1987) found that there was a connection between the observed competence and parental conflict regardless of the marital status of the parents. Parents who displayed higher levels of conflict in the presence of their adolescents tended to have adolescents who displayed more behavioral problems and a lower level of social cognitive functioning. In a later study, it was found that academic problems were also associated with high levels of post-divorce parental conflict (Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988).

Conflict in the spousal relationship, whether as a product of divorce or not, appears to affect children of divorce behaviorally, academically, and socially.

A common suggestion found in the literature is that the relationship between parents needs to be one of co-parenting, involving a low level of conflict (Brown, Portes, & Christensen, 1989; Emery, 1982; Guidubaldi, J., Cleminshaw, H. K., Perry, J. D., Nastasi, B. K., & Lightel, J., 1986) and more specifically that the child not be pulled into parental conflict (Emery, 1982; Portes et al., 1991; Tschann et al., 1989). The emphasis here seems to be on a continued supportive relationship between the child and both parents, and the ability of the parents to work out their own relationship issues without involving the child.

At two years post-divorce, Camara and Resnick (1989) found that in families where the parents were cooperative with each other in their parenting and attentive to the needs of their child, the child exhibited better social adjustment. It was suggested that these parents might be modeling for their child a healthy means of conflict resolution without resorting to aggressiveness or social withdrawal.

Regular contact between the child and the non-custodial parent is also suggested for promoting child adjustment (Brown et al., 1989; Emery, 1982; Guidubaldi et al., 1986) as is the positive relationship each parent shares with the child individually (Emery, 1982; Tschann et al., 1989; Guidubaldi et al., 1986). The child's having a relationship with both parents is generally correlated with better adjustment to the divorce process (Portes et al., 1991; Guidubaldi et al., 1986).

Because variation in family processes appears to influence children's post-divorce adjustment in so many ways, the present study was designed to specify how much influence might be extended through particular functions. This study examines various divorce related functions and their relation to child adjustment. In so doing, these links can be studied in developing effective family-based preventive interventions.

Method

One hundred and two subjects were recruited for this study from 15 elementary, four middle, and two public high schools in a mid-South urban area school. Inquiry forms were sent home with 111 children (45 boys and 66 girls) of parents who were separated or

divorced in which the custodial parent had not remarried. Balance of age, sex, and socio-economic status was sought to improve generalizability. In 91% of the cases, the custodial parent was female; in 7%, male; and in 2.7% the parents had joint custody.

The custodial parents' ages ranged from 24 to 50 years old, with the median age being 34 years. Occupational levels were categorized as follows: 20% professional, 12% white collar, 28.8% skilled manual, 14.4% semi-skilled, and 18.9% unskilled. Custodial parents with a 12th grade education encompassed 41.4% of this population, 23% had some college, and 10.8% were college graduates. The length of marriage ranged from one to 18 years, with 60% lasting for less than nine years. The time since divorce ranged from less than one year to 15 years, with approximately 75% of the couples having been divorced for over 2.5 years.

The instruments used were the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD), and the Divorce Adjustment Inventory (DAI). The CBCL uses a standardized format to measure behavioral problems and social competencies for children ages four to 16, as reported by the child's parent or by another who knows the child well (Achenbach et al., 1983). The social competence areas include items to assess the amount and quality of the child's involvement in sports, hobbies, clubs and organizations, jobs and chores, friendships, how well the child gets along with peers and family, and academic performance and difficulties (Achenbach et al., 1983). Three subscales for Social Competence are provided: Social, Activities, and School.

The FAD (Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983), which is completed by the custodial parent and each family member over the age of 12, was designed to assess family transactions and the organizational properties of the family system in order to assess family functioning. The seven scales of this assessment device are: Problem-solving, Communication, Roles, Affective Responsiveness, Affective Involvement, Behavior Control, and one score for General Functioning.

The Divorce Adjustment Inventory (Portes et al., 1991) was designed to measure the divorce risk factors present in the family. This measure is completed by the custodial parent to assess the behavioral and affective responses of the child. The four risk factors measured by the DAI are: External Support Systems, Child Reaction and Insight into Divorce, Post-Divorce Conditions Related to Level of Conflict in the Home, and Family Functioning and Stability.

The Social Competence Score and each of the Social subscores were used as dependent variables with the seven subscale scores for the FAD and the four risk factor scores of the DAI serving as the independent variables. Multiple regressions were employed to examine the relationships among these variables.

Results

A stepwise multiple regression analysis was used (Brown et al., in press) in order to determine the relative contribution of each of the family functioning variables to children's adjustment in specific areas. The latter are the Internalizing and Externalizing dimensions of coping and also the Social Competence of children of

divorce. The analytic strategy used was first to regress static measures (age of child, sex, SES, and time since divorce) and then proceed forward to identify aspects of family functioning (seven subscales from the FAD and four from the DAI). The results are summarized below:

Table 1

Child Adjustment Scores by Control and Family Variables

Dependent Variables		Predictors	
INTERNALIZING SCORE		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (not significant)
F=6.25 df(6,75) p < .0000		Step 2.	FAD3 R2 = .23
F=7.03 df(7,74) p < .0000			DAI II R2 = .07
F=7.18 df(8,73) p < .0000			DAI III R2 = .04
F=7.61 df(9,72) p < .0000			FAD4 R2 = .04
			Total R2 .49
EXTERNALIZING SCORE (R squared) R2 = .05		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (not significant)
F=6.57 df(6,75) p < .0000		Step 2.	FAD3 R2 = .31
F=7.35 df(7,74) p < .0000			DAI II R2 = .07
			Total R2 = .41
SOCIAL COMPETENCE SCORE (R squared) R2 = .08		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (not significant)
F=3.62 df(6,75) p < .003		Step 2.	FAD6 R2 = .14
			Total R2 = .22
ACTIVITY SCORE (R squared) R2 = .12		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (not significant)
F=3.14 df(6,75) p < .008		Step 2.	FAD6 R2 = .08
			Total R2 = .20

SOCIAL SCORE (R squared) R2 = .14		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (F=2.60 df(5,76) p < .0322)
F=5.28 df(6,75) p < .0001		Step 2.	FAD6 R2 = .15
F=5.40 df(7,74) p < .0001			FAD5 R2 = .04
			Total R2 = .33
SCHOOL SCORE (R squared) R2 = .01		Step 1.	Age, Sex, Income, Time (not significant)
F=3.02 df(6,75) p < .0107		Step 2.	DAI II R2 = .18
			Total R2 = .19

The measure of Family Roles (FAD3), which conceptually captures routines that serve the family, seems to be the main predictor of the degree to which the child internalizes stress (F=6.25, df(6,75) p < .0000). DAI factors II (F=7.03, df(7,74) p < .0000) and III (F=7.18, df(8,73) p < .0000) also appear relevant. These factors represent the rational, insightful dimension of the post-divorce family and the child's reaction to it, and post-divorce climate (e.g., parent conflict and child adjustment) in the post-divorce family. FAD 4 follows as the last predictor which represents Affective Responsiveness in the home (F=7.61, df(9,72) p < .0000).

For Externalizing, Roles (FAD 3) (F=6.57, df(6,75) p < .0000) is again followed by DAI II (F=7.35, df(7,74) p < .0000). These two variables account for a significant amount of the variance in child adjustment.

Children's Social Competence Scores were most highly predicted by FAD 6 (Behavior Control) (F = 3.62, df(6,75) p < .003) after controlling for static variables. Activity scores were predicted by

FAD6 ($F = 3.14$, $df(6,75)$ $p < .008$) after controlling for static variables. For the Social Score, the block of demographic predictors was significant ($F=2.60$, $df(5,76)$ $p < .03$). FAD6 was again the main predictor ($F=5.28$, $df(6,75)$ $p < .0001$) followed by FAD5 (Affective Involvement) ($F=5.40$, $df(7,74)$ $p < .0001$). School T-scores were predicted only by DAI factor II ($F = 3.02$ $df(6,75)$ $p < .01$) suggesting that children's post-divorce adjustment needs to be considered contextually.

Discussion

The findings of this study are important for at least two reasons. First, the field has been missing comparative family functioning data focused on children and the systems that they experience in undergoing parental divorce. Relatively little is known about the relation of various family conditions on the one hand, and aspects of children's adjustment on the other. This issue is considered in the present study from three major perspectives:

- Internalizing stress through depression, anxiety, social withdrawal, immaturity or self-destructive acts;
- Externalizing stress through aggression, delinquency, inattentiveness, or becoming unpopular; and
- Social competence with respect to activities, peer and family relations, and academic performance.

It seems that families which maintain effective support roles in nuturance and mutual support, and maintain some family rituals after the divorce are likely to minimize maladjustment of their children. These families continue to allocate resources and maintain assigned

roles as well as develop life skills through this stressful time. It comes as no surprise that this instrument (FAD) which has distinguished normal from pathological families can distinguish among level and types of child adjustment. But, just as important are post-divorce aspects of family functioning as divorcing parents come to terms with household decisions or remember the past fondly. DAI factor II also reflects the extent to which children can cope with post-divorce arrangements which suggests consistency in the parenting roles. When children have insight into the divorce and realize that "it is not part of their doing," their adjustment is maximized. DAI factor III also appears useful in suggesting ways to reduce internalizing stress at the time of divorce. It seems clear that parental conflict and animosity have an impact on children in ways that are registered through social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression. Children exposed to these post-divorce conditions are likely to regress emotionally. When parents do not resort to physical methods of control, children are likely to adjust well to the situation.

However, the fact that DAI factor III did not prove significant for the Externalizing measure does not clearly imply that those post-divorce conditions are independent of aggressive behavior on the part of the child. It should be noted that Internalizing and Externalizing scores are highly correlated (.80) which suggests that family functioning processes affect both adjustment indices.

Secondly, and more importantly, is the question "How can we help divorcing families function in order to maximize their children's well-being during this stressful time." The DAI is the first

empirically derived instrument aimed at divorced families. It provides direct suggestions for addressing risks in children on the basis of assessing the pre- and post-divorce family systems (Brown, Portes, & Brown, 1990). Interventions can be designed to address general and specific problem areas (e.g., post-divorce conflict, support systems) by developing components for children, parents, and both.

Finally, the fact that several important subscales of the FAD did not prove significant deserves some attention. It may be that Problem-solving, Communication, Affective Involvement and other areas of family functioning, although important, may be incorporated more directly in many items of the DAI. This could be due in part to the fact that the FAD is designed to assess intact families and many of those items are not as relevant to this population.

The relationships between family processes and child functioning appear to be of greater significance than those related to demographic factors. The current assessment of those processes represent an effort to specify family conditions which vary in their effect on different areas of child functioning. Given the nature of the findings, it seems logical to design and evaluate programs for children of divorce based, in part, on the above approach. It would seem beneficial for mental health professionals and others who come in contact with the family system (teachers, clergy) to be aware of the relationship between family functioning and child adjustment to divorce. Divorcing families, particularly those who have children at risk, could be targeted for education and early intervention. Education for parents could focus on the needs of children of

divorce and the family conditions which facilitate child adjustment. Early intervention efforts could assist families in implementing changes in the family system which would promote child adjustment to the divorce process. In sum, a systems approach to understanding divorce appears useful in assessing initial risk as well as the effectiveness of various program components.

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